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Subject: Cortez Journal: Rico begins lead clean-up project

July 6, 2004

## **Cortez Journal: Rico begins lead clean-up project**

BY ABBE SMITH

Journal Intern

Two nurses sat in a dark classroom in Rico Elementary School last week chatting and waiting for residents of the mountain town to get off work and drop in for a free blood test.

When 35 residents underwent voluntary testing for lead in the spring, results confirmed that no one had lead levels exceeding safety standards, despite elevated levels of the potentially toxic metal in much of the old mining town's soil.

"People are not panicked about this," resident and registered nurse Catherine Allen says.

Rico is in the early stages of a massive clean-up project to rid the town of lead leftover from its silver-mining days. The Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO), which formerly owned the Rico Argentine Mine, along with Rico Renaissance development company and the town of Rico have submitted a "Rico Soils Voluntary Clean-up Application" to the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. ARCO and Rico Renaissance have volunteered to pay for the cleanup of contaminated soil.

Lead contamination in the blood can cause high blood pressure, an inability to absorb Vitamin D, decreased kidney filtration and nervous system damage. Lead is especially toxic to children.

Allen and Marilyn Griebel, a nurse practitioner and resident, have been sitting around since 3 p.m. ready to prick fingers and seal samples.

"When you move to a mining town, you expect to find leftovers in the soil," Allen says. "I'm not worried. And I'm not worried when my grandchildren come here."

Most residents of the town of 250 agree. The proof is in the placidity of the afternoon at blood-testing headquarters. Alarm is not apparent.

Alarm, however, was more evident in February when officials from the Environmental Protection Agency informed residents about just how much lead contaminated their land.

The EPA's Debra Ehlert said the agency sampled 54 mostly residential properties last summer and that four of them had levels of contamination of 3,000 parts per million or more. Those tests only covered about a quarter of the town's properties.

This summer's a different story.

Eric Heil, Rico's town attorney, says the EPA will sample all properties in the town. Residents soon will receive access agreements in the mail that give consent for the sampling. When the test results come back in August, EPA officials and representatives from ARCO will have a discussion with town members about what level of cleanup is needed.

One thing's for certain. EPA, ARCO and the CDPHE agree that properties with 3,000 ppm must be cleaned up this summer.

That in-cludes the Van Winkle Headframe area, the historic mining structure built in the 1940s that dropped miners down a vertical shaft. The fenced-off headframe sits at the end of a winding dirt road and is surrounded by residents' homes and a huge, crumbled pile of waste rock.

Waste rock and tailings from milling are two sources of lead in the town. The fine-powdered tailings cause more problems with health and water quality than waste rock. ARCO voluntarily cleaned up tailings piles in the mid '90s under the watch of the CDPHE, although more permanent work may still need to be done.

Heil said at this stage of the cleanup - saving the leaky St. Louis Tunnel for another day - the goal is simple: Remove bad soil; replace with good soil. The top foot of soil will be removed from heavily contaminated residential properties and replaced. Town leaders are in the process of picking out a location north of town for a repository for the removed soil.

But as soon as residents breathe a sigh of relief when the last load of bad soil is hauled out of town, they have to address the issue of future development and excavation that could dig up more lead problems. Heil says the town needs to develop a permit system for excavating to protect against future contamination.

"We're at 200 properties now. After build out, we're looking at 800 houses and Main Street," he said.

Because of Rico's elevation - 8,827 feet - and freeze depth, builders have to dig at least five feet for a house's foundation. That cuts right into potentially lead-contaminated soil.

"That's why a local repository is so important," Heil said. "Then people who excavate can bring the dirt to the repository. It won't cost future people developing."

Rico wants to grow - but not too much.

"We don't want to be another Colorado resort town," Heil said.

The town is making real progress toward its goal of growth without excess. Just last year, Rico secured \$4 million in grants and loans for a sewer system. The town also has received funds for a

watershed plan and wetlands mapping project. Plans for a river corridor park are in the works.

But growth in the right direction hinges on successful mitigation of the town's post-mining days woes. Heil said keeping cleanup in the hands of local authorities is key to that progress.

"Superfund or EPA enforcement action would give a negative stigma to town," he said. "Then you have the house of cards fall apart."

*Reach Abbe Smith [here](#) .*